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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 000721

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KCUL SOCI CH

SUBJECT: THE TROUBLE WITH KIDS: 20-40 GENERATION GAP
EMERGES AMID CRITICISM OF CHINA'S YOUTH

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Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) It is fashionable among Chinese elites who were born in the 1960s or before to criticize current Chinese college students and recent graduates as self-absorbed and materialistic. Scholars and journalists have told us that in their view, a "20-40" generation gap is emerging between young people who have only experienced a prosperous, rising China (those in their 20s) and their elders who remember the Cultural Revolution, the heady openness of the 1980s and the 1989 crackdown (those in their 40s). Many of our contacts expressed concern that knee-jerk nationalism and lack of civic awareness among the young and acquisitive risk producing an unstable society down the line. For their part, twentysomethings are aware of the criticism and call it unjustified, claiming that they are doing their best amid the complex economic and social pressures of modern China. Sociologists pointed out that the lack of political activism among young people today, regardless of the reasons, serves the interests of China's current leadership, for whom stability remains a top priority.
End Summary.

A Dim View From the Lectern

12. (C) Academic contacts we spoke with said today's university students compare unfavorably to those they taught in the 1980s in terms of political awareness. Xing Xiaoqun (protect) has been a teacher at China Youth University for Political Science for close to two decades. She said she has noticed a pronounced difference between her present and past pupils, observing that students in the 1980s were focused on advancing and improving society. While that does not mean they were all political activists, Xing emphasized that there was a sense on campus that the most worthwhile areas of study involved trying to build a better country. Nowadays, young people are concerned only with themselves, Xing charged. Her students are obsessed with getting a good job, earning money and buying things. "I find this very disappointing," she lamented. Youth coming of age today never had to experience hardship or political tumult. They have only known a prosperous, increasingly confident China, which is not necessarily a bad thing -- but it can breed complacency, Xing suggested. With a stake in the status quo, students

are less likely to press for changes, she said.

¶3. (C) Such disengagement from political affairs is exactly what China's current leadership wants, surmised Li Qiang, Dean of the Sociology Department at Tsinghua who has taught for more than two decades. In

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his view, the 20-40 generation gap is very pronounced. Like Xing, Li recalled that students in the 1980s were very passionate about political issues, a byproduct of and reaction to the Mao era, when everything was politicized. Today's students do not necessarily ignore politics, but there is little desire to embark on a public-oriented career with a view to making a difference in society. Echoing other scholars, Li judged that there is no way a 1989-type movement could happen now because students care primarily about themselves and personal economic gain. This is squarely in the interests of the current Government, whose watchword is social stability, especially on college campuses, he said.

Tiananmen: Still a Taboo

¶4. (C) One common trait among fortysomethings and twentysomethings is that neither generation likes to discuss the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. For the older group "June 4 is too sad a topic," said Wu Jiaxiang, an author in his 50s who served as an aide to Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang in the 1980s. For former activists and others who supported the demonstrations, memories of the movement's violent end are painful, "especially if you or someone you knew was hurt or wound up in jail," Wu remarked. While current

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students and recent graduates may have fuzzy memories of the demonstrations, they do not obsess over 1989. Students at top universities in particular constitute China's elite and they have a stake in status quo. They want a piece of China's humming economic action and they recognize that being vocal about Tiananmen (or turning it into a romantic cause celebre) could jeopardize their ambitions, Wu said. In fact, recent protests on college campuses in China have involved economics, not politics. When students rampaged in Jiangxi and Henan provinces last year (ref A), they were upset about how the diminished status of their diplomas might affect employment prospects.

No Campus Is an Island

¶5. (C) That universities are no longer insulated from the pressures of the real world contributes to the shift in student character, our contacts said. Outside influences encroach on academia more than ever now, said Wang Feng (protect), a journalist at the influential bi-weekly Caijing magazine. At 30, Wang said he perceives the 20-40 generation gap and feels more similar to the older types. Today's students worry about post-graduate employment to the extent that even by sophomore year they are angling for internships at businesses. Wang, who is in charge of Caijing's internship program, said he has mixed feelings about the current class of young people apprenticing at the magazine. They are sophisticated and have more exposure to the outside world, particularly via the Internet. They are whip smart when it comes to economics and business. But what troubles Wang is lack of interest in or understanding of basic journalistic ethics, politics or "human compassion," he said. In fact, most interns are not interested in media careers. Rather, they want to

parlay their experience at prestigious Caijing into a job at a consultancy or other business. This generation will contribute mightily to China's economic progress, Wang predicted. But in terms of making China a healthier, more equitable society, "I have my worries," he said.

Nationalism May Be Growing

¶6. (C) Chinese born in the 1960s and after are more engaged with and fascinated by the world beyond China than any of their predecessors were. But our contacts said the younger set takes more unbridled pride in China's rising global status. College students and young professionals formed the backbone of the anti-Japan protests that unfolded across China in April 2005 (ref B). Our reading from sociologists is that twentysomethings came of age during a time when China has known only stability and prosperity and are loath to see their country play second fiddle to any other nation. Added to the equation is that the newly commercialized media indirectly stokes nationalism by playing up China's successes while giving pride of place to bad news for the United States and Japan. Nonetheless, scholars were not entirely downbeat, noting that the various influences on young people's lives, including access to online information and ideas, tend to keep extremist passions in perspective.

"Who Needs Two Cell Phones?"

¶7. (C) While pleased by China's success, twentysomethings still sense a connection to the troubled recent past, said Li Tao (protect), a professor at Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication. Born in 1967, Li said he feels more in common with people born in the 1950s than with those whose birthdates are in the 1980s. He and his forebears were in primary school at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. They remember Mao. They remember China when it was a very poor and insular place. "My parents, brothers and sisters and I led a very simple life," Li recalled. In addition, Li grew up prior to the one-child policy, so he and many of his friends have brothers and sisters, unlike young people today. In his view, this has made his generation more capable of cooperation and hashing out differences. He and his contemporaries are also more empathetic about the plight of others.

¶8. (C) Another pronounced difference, Li continued,

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is that he and other twentysomethings have simple taste in entertainment. They like to go home after work, open a beer, maybe get together with friends and talk or watch a movie. When they talk, they chat about goings on in the world or in the nation, including politically. The twentysomethings Li has spent time with have little interest in such issues. They like talking about jobs, cars, the newest cell phones. "Some of my younger sister's friends own two cell phones," said Citizen Magazine journalist He Jiangtao, 36, who complained bitterly to poloff about what he views as the wasteful greediness of the younger generation. "Who needs two cell phones?"

The Modern Social Pressure Cooker

¶9. (C) Despite such complaints, some contacts cast the generational differences in a relatively positive light. Current college students and recent graduates do not have the luxury of spending time pondering

political issues, said Wu Yin (protect), the chief research supervisor at the Horizon public opinion firm. Unlike their predecessors, newly minted graduates do not receive assigned jobs from the government after graduation, introducing a new level of uncertainty into the lives of China's young people. As such, youths naturally have to focus on themselves, on building their resumes, on making good decisions about their futures, Wu argued. Some people call this selfishness or lack of awareness about the society that surrounds them. In fact, it is a natural consequence of modern challenges and it will produce young people who are more comfortable making tough choices, Wu said. Moreover, Wu questioned the stereotype of the disengaged youth. According to his research, he said people in their early 20s place high importance on developing rule of law and on improving the lot of society's have-nots.

People Try to Put Us Down ...

¶10. (C) Chen Ping, who graduated from Beijing University in 2006, has heard the criticisms and rejects them. He told poloff he made a point of being active in the civic life of his school. During his time at the university, Chen became head of the student international relations club and also volunteered for a non-profit organization dedicated to helping the blind in poor, rural Shanxi province. But this sense of civic awareness has not convinced him of the value of public service in the official sense. Going against the wishes of his parents, who are in their early 50s, Chen passed over an offer to join the Foreign Ministry (which would have paid RMB 2,000 per month, or USD 250) in favor of working for a South Korean telecommunications firm, which offered USD 2,000 per month.

... And Maybe They're Right?

¶11. (C) Shi Rong, currently a Beijing University senior and English major, differed in her view. Shi herself cares about politics and follows social developments in China. She and her friends e-mail foreign news stories to each other about incidents of unrest in China, occasionally referring to themselves as "counter-revolutionary bastards" when disseminating particularly sensitive material within their group via e-mail. Nonetheless, Shi believes she and her circle are in the minority and that older people's criticism of her generation has some truth to it. "I believe my generation is not at all engaged in politics. People only care about themselves," she said. Shi is currently applying to graduate schools in the United States.

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